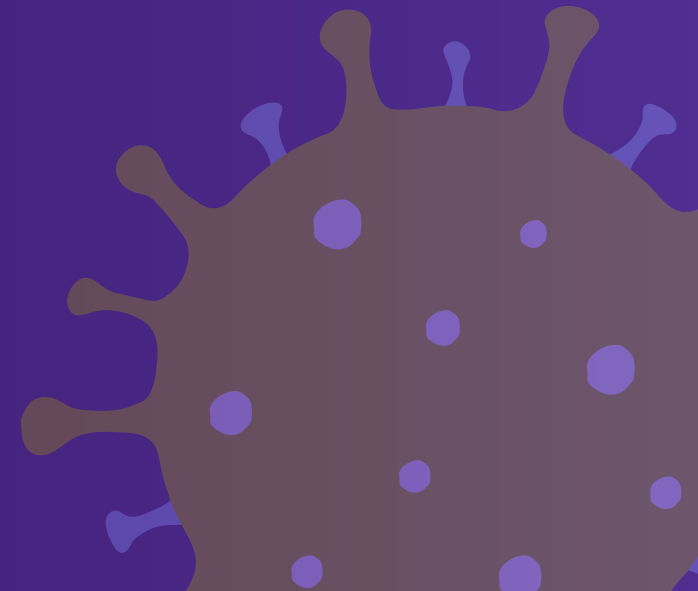


# A Vision for Post-COVID-19 Meetings

>> How Event Professionals Are Reimagining the Future of Gathering <<

A **Smart**meetings  
White Paper

May 2020



# Executive Summary

**A** *Smart Meetings* survey of meeting professionals finds they are actively planning today for a post-COVID meetings landscape. Event planners are creatively adapting to the new realities for maintaining high hygiene and safety standards—and for reassuring attendees that their health will not be at risk as they begin to meet face to face again.

The industry faced the sudden, unexpected challenge to their business model and livelihood with compassion and creativity, including the demonstration of generous service to local communities, flexible postponement strategies and innovative meeting platforms. Planners and hospitality professionals have used this crisis period as a laboratory to design, develop and refine methodologies to move forward, professionally and personally. They are testing new delivery methods and learning what works in the physical and virtual world so they can achieve their objectives even more successfully when their entire toolkit is once again at their disposal.

And ultimately, the very absence of face-to-face gatherings may serve to underscore and reinforce their value going forward. The entire world is now missing what they may have taken for granted in the past.

This deep dive into how we arrived at this point, how the industry is reacting and what we can expect was researched and compiled as a response to the quest for guidance seen in the *Smart Meetings* community. Our editors asked industry leaders, destination champions and planners doing the hard work of moving forward with little certainty in the flood of information available every day. We hope it will act as a directional marker for those in the industry blazing new paths into what we hope will be an even richer and more effective use of gathering to advance research, business, social and cultural goals.

—The *Smart Meetings* Editorial Team

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It is time to rethink meeting design—from strategy and room setup to food and beverage to the very definition of security. As shelter-in-place orders designed to slow the spread of COVID-19 are lifted in waves across the world, meeting professionals are rethinking best practices for achieving goals that can only be accomplished face-to-face.

*Smart Meetings* created a checklist of the essential elements of a meeting and then surveyed\* the community, veteran planners and industry analysts. **Smart Meetings' Post-COVID-19 Meeting Industry Vision Survey** asked how planners are taking this time to readjust, learn new skill sets and rethink best practices. Following is a synthesis of their insights.

### **Creative Responses to Initial Disruption**

First, a timeline of how we arrived at this point as an industry and how the community responded.

The call to limit gatherings larger than family units in order to “flatten the curve” of COVID-19 infection hit the U.S. meeting industry hard in mid-March as shelter-in-place orders spread across the

United States. Convention centers became field hospitals almost overnight, and hotels started closing, furloughing or were put to use housing vulnerable homeless populations, recovering coronavirus patients, first responders and medical workers, or a combination of these.

That left a lot of meetings planned for Q2 of 2020 cancelled with little to no notice. After a patchwork of tough decisions about making accommodations, events for thousands of people that in some cases had been in the planning stage for months were suddenly off the calendar.

Many properties had already ordered tons of food to feed expected guests and chose to donate these items to charities. Pechanga Resort Casino in Southern California donated nearly \$100,000 of food to three local charities. Caesars' Entertainment sent 116,000 pounds of food to a Las Vegas food bank. And The Greater Philadelphia Hotel Association, along with Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, established a Hospitality Workers Relief Fund and supply pantry to feed more than 10,000 people. Similar giving was seen throughout the country.

\*Methodology: Smart Meetings emailed a survey to 16,000 subscribers the week of April 22 and received 250 responses.

# Timeline

## December 29, 2019

- Wuhan hospital reports first four cases of “pneumonia of unknown etiology.”

## January 24, 2020

- China implements quarantines in 12 cities

## January 27, 2020

- U.S. implements screening at 20 airports”

## February 11, 2020

- WHO names the disease COVID-19, short for coronavirus disease 2019

## March 4, 2020

- IMEX Frankfurt canceled

## March 11, 2020

- WHO declares coronavirus outbreak a pandemic
- Governors in Ohio and California ban gatherings of 250 people or more
- Wuhan reports just 5 new cases

## March 19, 2020

- G7 Summit held via videoconference
- U.S. State Department issues level-four “Do Not Travel” advisory
- California issues stay-at-home order for all 40 million residents

## March 27, 2020

- \$2 trillion CARES stimulus plan passed in United States
- Nearly 1/3 of world population living under coronavirus-related social distancing restrictions

## April 14, 2020

- GMID 2020 attempts to break Guinness World Records title for largest audience for a virtual conference

## April 21

- Marriott announces Global Cleanliness Council; Wynn announces safeguards, followed by Hilton Hotels, Accor, Hyatt and ASM Global

## April 27

- EIC announces APEX COVID-19 Business Recovery Task Force co-chaired by Michael Dominguez and Kristin Horstman

## April 28, 2020

- MPI announced that it had successfully postponed World Education Congress to November 3-6 in Grapevine, Texas

## April 30, 2020

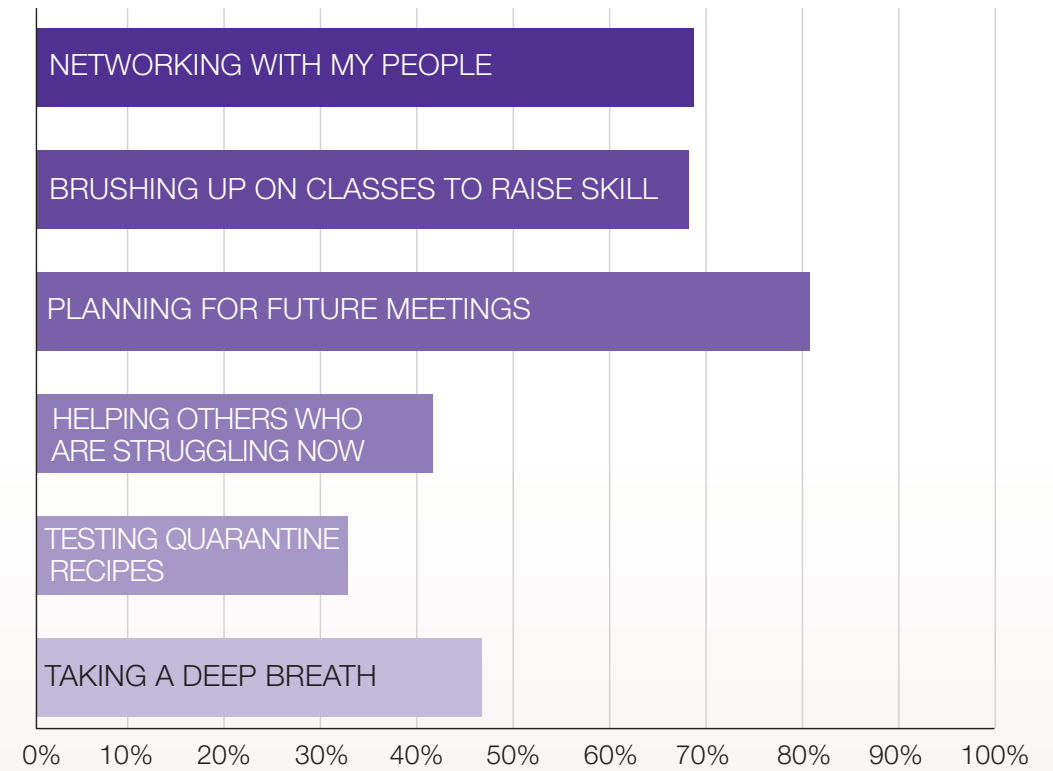
- States begin to reopen

# Meeting Professionals Continued Planning

Limits on group activity did not slow planners for long. A supermajority of survey respondents (80 percent) said they were still planning for future meetings.

While many were sheltering in place, some were still working on site as essential employees or had added the job of parenting children home from school. Multitasking planners said they were also networking through videoconferencing platforms (69 percent), brushing up on classes to raise skill levels (68 percent) and helping others who were struggling right now (42 percent). Just under half (47 percent) said they were focusing on taking a deep breath.

## HOW ARE YOU USING THE DOWN TIME? (Multiple responses were allowed)



# 'Postpone' Emerges as Favored Alternative

Lawyers, after much handwringing, almost universally agreed a world under lockdown fell under force majeure because it was both “impracticable” and illegal to meet. That left meeting professionals with three choices. **Postpone:** reschedule to a date when, it was hoped, it would be allowed, safe and acceptable to gather. **Pivot:** flip the meeting to a virtual format. **Cancel:** wait until there was more certainty; or, at best, a vaccine.

Moving meetings to a future date was the most common survey response, but it turned out individual planners utilized a combination of postponing, pausing and pivoting.

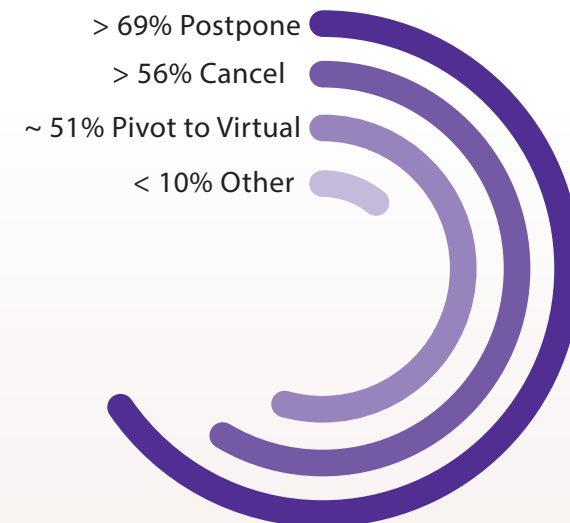
While more than 56 percent said they had to cancel some meetings due to the complexity, size and risk profile, more than 69 percent said they would be postponing, and almost 51 percent said they would pivot to virtual.

A telling statistic was that in many cases the same planner was employing multiple strategies rather than postponing all or canceling wholesale. A third (34 percent) said they would be both postponing and

pivoting, and a quarter of respondents (23 percent) said they would be doing all three.

Julie Blank, director of strategic accounts with Brightspot Incentives & Events, based in Dallas, had 18 incentive events derailed, and although a majority wanted to rebook, only about 25 percent were able to make it happen this year. “People have worked for a solid year to earn these trips and rewarding them isn’t something that can be done online,” she said.

## HOW ARE YOU HANDLING MEETINGS PLANNED FOR Q2?



# Cancel Culture

A parade of large tech companies announced in March that they would be canceling or transforming their signature events to virtual platforms through mid-2021. For the first time in more than three decades, Apple made the call—and made it early—to eliminate the in-person component of its June Worldwide Developers Conference and stream keynotes and make sessions available online for 23 million developers instead. The company also pledged to give \$1 million to organizations in San Jose to offset lost revenues.

Thereafter, Microsoft gave notice that the 25,000-person Ignite IT professional conference planned for September 2020 in New Orleans would not have a physical footprint. Its 2020 MVP Global Summit planned for March 15 was also cancelled and no details were forthcoming about the 2021 event. “With the unknowns around global travel and COVID-19, we will not be releasing future MVP Global Summit dates at this time,” was the official statement.

Then, in mid-April, Facebook announced (in a post, of course) that

it was canceling all its planned physical events of more than 50 people through June 2021.

Many other organizations, corporate and nonprofit, felt they had no choice but to put the brakes on large, complex events until a clearer picture of the health and safety landscape was available.

**“Large tech companies led the parade in canceling or transforming their signature events to virtual platforms... Many other organizations, corporate and nonprofit, felt they had no choice but to put the brakes on large, complex events until a clearer picture of the health and safety landscape was available.”**



# Pivot to Virtual

**J**ust over half of planners, according to the survey, are planning to convert their programming to a virtual or hybrid program to expand their reach beyond the number of people willing to travel to a destination in the short term. Several commenters ventured a guess that more meeting professionals will be comfortable in the future planning hybrid meetings and charging for streaming content.

Facebook exemplified the trend as it announced in February that instead of a single 5,000-person F8 developer conference, it would host local events, as well as offering videos and live-streamed content.

The learning curve has been steep for some.

Meeting professionals quickly came to terms with the reality that turning a face-to-face meeting into a virtual meeting that meets all a company's Key Performance Indicators of education, commerce, networking and inspiration is not as easy as turning on a video camera.

Planning the most effective meetings starts with a sharp picture of the needs of attendees. Then, sought-after content must be delivered deftly and with the kind of professionalism and flash today's audiences

are accustomed to seeing daily on their television screens. The challenge becomes grabbing and keeping audience attention so that the information presented is retained despite the many possible distractions of the digital environment (including pets, kids and texts).

They must be interactive, customizable and streamlined as compared to an in-person event. A compelling virtual event could require a production team as large or larger than the AV team at a convention center. Also required for maximum impact: a professional moderator, a technical help-desk team, music and digital programs, and interactive elements such as polls, breakouts and prizes.

Digital programs also must add value for sponsors and the host. "Businesses that have long relied on in-person events to drive business goals are certainly feeling the absence of those events," said Ben Hindman, CEO of Splash, an integrated platform for live, virtual and hybrid events. "You can't replace the impact of a live event with yet another digital ad campaign."

But how to replicate trade-show booths and mixers? Virtual

# Pivot to Virtual

platforms simulate encounters in 3-D video-game style, including tracking behavior in real time. Webinars can encompass video commercials, and emerging solutions are even tapping into the hosted-buyer model.

Laura Welsh, CEO of Conference Software Solutions (CSS), understands the importance of one-on-one settings that allow meeting professionals to continue discovering and sourcing for the future. She counsels companies pioneering the format of informative meetings that include virtual speed-dating (like the ones *Smart Meetings* hosted in April) to preserve as many of the elements of an in-person meeting as possible. She also advises starting with a check-in and platform training so even nontechies can enjoy the experience. “It won’t replace face-to-face, but it will help drive business when we can’t meet,” Welsh says.

As planners have been forced to master virtual-meeting technology and strategies, many theorized that the fear factor may have been surmounted and that streaming could be another reliable go-to in the meeting professionals’ toolbelt.

“The hybrid meeting will be here to stay,” declared Becky

Cavanaugh, associate director of global clinical education and strategic programs at Syneos Health in Cincinnati, Ohio. “People want to be a part of the meeting. If they can’t travel due to any type of restrictions or inability to attend in person, they’ll want to join virtually, so long as they are engaged and made to feel part of the meeting. It will be the job of meeting planners to ensure that engagement is felt by all.”

**“Meeting professionals quickly came to terms with the reality that turning a face-to-face meeting into a virtual meeting that meets Key Performance Indicators of education, commerce, networking and inspiration is not as easy as turning on a video camera.”**

# Return to Meeting

**W**hile some survey respondents thought meetings would come back with a vengeance, thanks to all the Q2 meetings pushed to the Q4 calendar, most said that group events would more likely come back tentatively, and with new security measures in place to keep people healthy.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has put together guidance for large gatherings on its website. And a number of hotel groups (Marriott International, Hilton Hotels, Hyatt, Accor, Wynn and ASM Global, to name a few) came out with cleanliness initiatives in the final week of April, to formalize what that will mean at the property level.

Nonetheless, meeting professionals said they are looking for official standards to benchmark safety best practices in room design, elevator operation, food and beverage, additional restroom facilities, increased internet bandwidth to accommodate all those streaming digital meetings, ubiquitous signage about social distancing and how often the lobby has been cleaned, and operational guidelines for things such as staggered registration and breaks.

“We need a clearer picture of what it means to get back to business,” said Amy Calvert, CEO of Events Industry Council, which recently launched APEX COVID-19 Business Recovery Task Force as “a clearinghouse to put all information about protocols from all these agencies in one place.” Michael Dominguez, president and CEO of Associated Luxury Hotels International and co-chair of the task force, said it was time to pull together a roadmap of the entire attendee journey from door to door, and what can be done at each stage, as time goes on. “The strength of our industry has always been in our ability to work together.” Dominguez said.

Sandy Joyce, head of global event marketing with Discover Financial Services in Chicago, said, “I think there will be a new normal in the industry to adhere to state and international guidelines for health and safety.”

What, exactly, will be different? “Everything,” according to Heather Sampson, CMP, DES, director of conference planning with Nurse Practitioner Associates for Continuing Education.

# Return to Meeting

## F&B

Guidelines will have to include new standards for food and beverage, said Beckie Souleymane, director of meetings and operations with American Association of Political Consultants in Washington, D.C. “The days of attendees serving themselves from a buffet are behind us,” she said.

Mary Cline, regional director of catering sales for Wolfgang Puck Catering in Atlanta, suggested that while prepackaged meal kits may be the bridge for the short term, serviced buffets with a chef preparing the meal behind an acrylic screen and orderly guest visitation could be the way forward.

## Security

Many are looking to technology such as

thermal sensors, UV sterilization or tests for COVID-19 presence or immunity to clear the path for a safer world. Many of the hotel reopening plans call for use of thermal sensors to single out people who have elevated body temperatures for further screening. However, industry observers warn that any use must comply with regulations from organizations such as FDA, International Organization for Standardization and Americans with Disabilities Act.

Mark Herrera, director of education and life safety with International Association of Venue Managers, which runs a COVID-19 Industry Advisory Group, said the stakes are high for getting security right. “If we fail, there will be adverse affects on the entire industry,” he said

## Contracts

The abundance of caution and go-slow approach may not all be on the attendee side of the equation. Many planners expressed a fear of signing binding contracts when there is so much uncertainty. Planners are asking for and getting more flexible attrition, food and beverage minimums, cancellation terms and enhanced force majeure clauses.

Veteran attorney John Foster from Foster, Jensen & Gulley, a specialist in the legal aspects of meetings, framed the contractual horizon ahead this way: “Both sides need to have realistic, comprehensive language that covers the realities of a post-coronavirus world.” He stressed the importance of comprehensive “illegality of performance”

# Return to Meeting

and “frustration of purpose” statements that spell out all types of foreseeable, known and unknown catastrophes, including epidemics and diseases, in the city of the event and in one or more cities attendees would be traveling from or through. He said legal agreement should also encompass military conflict, material changes at the property, extreme weather events, earthquakes, labor disputes or any other act or occurrence creating a potentially significant risk to the health or safety of anticipated attendees—in short, anything that could affect your ability to meet.

## Costs

All the additional steps required to keep people safe will come at a cost, Sampson warned.

Reduced room capacities will drive down revenue, and event costs will need to increase to cover the expense of additional cleaning supplies and the extra labor needed to maintain a healthy environment.

## Staffing

Unfortunately, some of that transition may have to happen without many of the hospitality pros who led the industry out of the last crisis. As Warren Isenhour, an event management consultant based in Nashville, Tennessee, pointed out, “This crisis will eliminate many good, quality professionals and small businesses from our industry. We will be charting new waters and have to develop new relationships and expectations as the industry evolves

and recovers.” He does see at least a partial silver lining, however. “There will be so many new and innovative measures that rise out of the ashes of COVID. It is mutually discouraging, devastating and exciting!”

## Timeline

While almost all respondents agreed that the industry will come back, the open question seemed to be how and when.

“People will want to get back some form of normalcy, but I believe it will come slowly and build back up. There will be more precautions and more reluctance in the beginning, but we will bounce back, and we will be stronger and more creative than ever before,” concluded Shirli Goodman, vice president of marketing

# Return to Meeting

and events with Nexxus Solutions Group.

Many suggested baby steps would start with smaller, regional meetings until people feel more comfortable and testing and treatment are in place. The speed on the road to previous attendance levels could also depend on how quickly the overall economy recovers as cash-strapped companies with fewer employees might send fewer people to conventions.

Hesitation could be temporary, however. Shauna McNaughton, vice president of global enterprise solutions with Meetings & Incentives Worldwide, suggested that the first six months will be different, with social-distancing requirements and new meeting-space needs and travel guidelines. “But then we will start the transition back to the powerful

industry that we were,” she affirms. “Eventually, we will be a lot stronger with all of the valuable lessons learned during this period.”

It will be the job of the meeting professional to help everyone feel comfortable again, said Terri Lynn Yanke, founder and CEO of Eventful Advantage in Madison, Wisconsin. “[Attendees] will be a bit tentative and scared, so additional measures need to be planned to make them feel safe to attend.” She suggested staggered seating, promoting the wearing of masks (possibly branded), highly visible sanitation measures and handshake alternatives. “If these practices are both planned and communicated, this will help attendees feel better about attending a live meeting after all this time staying in place,” she said.

**“Meeting professionals said they are looking for official standards to benchmark safety best practices in room design, elevator operation, food and beverage, additional restroom facilities...and operational guidelines for things such as staggered registration and breaks.”**

# New Attitude

**T**he end result of all the distancing could be a greater value placed on what meeting professionals do, according to some respondents. “I think we will have a better appreciation for each other and our face-to-face interactions. We can accomplish a lot virtually, but we truly are stronger together...human connections and the level of productivity accomplished in gatherings won’t go away,” in the words of industry consultant Kate Patay.

Delegates may have to learn to be content with a nod of the head instead of a handshake or a hug, predicted Cory Fowkes, director of production with Next Level Event Design. “Some people will engage faster than others,” he said. “Some people may be very scarred by this experience, and we have to somehow know and navigate that nonverbally and respectfully.”

In the end, all the changes may add up to a net improvement in the minds of many meeting-goers. “I believe meetings will head toward simplicity and focus on attendees exchanging, sharing and providing solutions—and less about all the noise,” said Kym Conis, managing

director of American Mold Builders Association. “The fanfare had gotten out of control at in-person meetings.”

Julie Blank, who earlier reported that she was rebooking meetings whenever possible, was also optimistic. “I honestly expect, and truly hope, that people will appreciate being together more. I think we will pay greater attention to each other, show more care for each other and just appreciate nondevice-generated time together—from six feet apart of course, and with a mask, and maybe gloves. But still together.” She concluded her written comment with the universal symbol for optimism and hospitality—a smiley face.

And here is an outcome everyone can hope for. Jeanette Paschal, president of Sound Meetings & Event Management in Raleigh, North Carolina, ventured the following: “We will all be more gracious and kind to each other.”